

INDICES TO PUBLIC DOCUMENTS.

PAPERS

EXPLANATORY

OF THE PLAN OF GORDON'S PROPOSED INDEX OF PUBLIC DOCUMENTS,

Laid before the House by Mr. Burke, from the joint Committee on the Library.

JANUARY 11, 1845.

Read, and committed to the Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union.

COLEMAN'S HOTEL, *December 17, 1844.*

DEAR SIR: Pursuant to your request, I hasten to offer you some remarks relative to the proposed indices.

Some years since, having occasion to consult the congressional records, I found so little assistance from the existing indices, that I conceived the design of framing others which might prove more satisfactory. I addressed a letter of inquiry upon the subject to the members of the 25th Congress, and learned, from their replies, that the difficulties I had encountered were universally felt. By them, and by many members of every succeeding Congress, I have been urged to the speedy completion of the proposed work. The plan which was submitted to Congress has been repeatedly referred to committees, and favorably reported on; yet, from the pressure of business, none of these reports have been brought up for consideration.

The existing indices to the records of the House of Representatives consist of five parts, covering, together, a period of half a century—from the foundation of the government to the year 1839—made at different times, and upon different models.

No. 1, extending from the 1st to the 14th Congress, (from 1789 to 1817,) is an index to executive *printed* documents, and to *manuscript* records, with a list of reports arranged under the head of each department. This index is grievously deficient in indicating the nature and contents of the documents to which it refers. A single instance, taken from a thousand, abundantly illustrates this. On the 5th page, we are told that the President sent to the House a message on "aggressions;" but this is all. There is not a single explanatory word. And of this unsatisfactory character is the whole compilation of 117 pages. The list of documents appended is subject to the same objections; and to the additional one, that it may be necessary to go through all the list, in search of what we require, with scarce a hope of success.

Blair & Rives, print.

No. purports to be an index to reports of committees, from the 1st to the 15th Congress, (1789 to 1819,) comprised in 60 pages. This has all the faults of its predecessor. It is absolutely impossible to learn from it, with respect to a large majority of its subjects, their nature, or the action had upon them. Thus, what satisfactory knowledge can we gain from this line, oft repeated as the title of a report: "Address to the President, in answer to his speech to Congress"?

No. 3 comprises an index to the executive communications to the 15th, 16th, and 17th Congresses, (1817 to 1823,) with a list of reports from each department separately, and an index to reports of committees. With the faults of the other compilations, we have here that of great complexity. The documents are arranged, alphabetically, in the order of the sessions at which they were presented, and, consequently, under six alphabets. And then we have the same documents classed by the departments from which they emanated; and what are not so given, are arranged as "*miscellaneous*." The index to the reports of the committees has all the vacuity and uncertainty of its companions, with all the complexity of their arrangement. How shall we find our way, readily, through this labyrinth?

No. 4, from the 18th to the 21st Congress, (1823 to 1831,) is an index to the executive documents, and reports of committees, distinguishing between documents and reports. This first attempt at a properly digested index is useful and meritorious. It is comprehended by one alphabet; documents and reports of like character are brought under one title; in many cases some information is given of their contents; and the labor of research is thus simplified, though not rendered easy. The reference to the reports of committees, however, is very unsatisfactory; since, though the subject of the report be sometimes given, we are rarely told whether the report be affirmative or negative, or informed of the principles on which it is based.

No. 5, an index to the executive documents, and reports of committees, from the 22d to the 25th Congress, (1831 to 1839,) was made after the exemplar of my plan was filed in the archives of the House, and is far the best in the series. It covers but eight years, yet fills 380 closely printed octavo pages in small type; whilst the first index, comprehending twenty-eight years, has only 117 open pages of large type. Had the compiler adhered more closely to the exemplar, this index, for the period which it covers, would have been all that could be desired; although in too many cases the character of the documents is undeveloped, in others a satisfactory analysis is given.

The defects will be apparent by reference to the title "President of the United States," the first paragraph under which (page 290) is "Amendments proposed to the constitution in relation to the election of." This is a prominent title, and should have contained under it the nature of the amendments, and the congressional action thereon; yet we have nothing of this, nor even a reference to the place of the document; we are referred, however, to the title "Constitution," yet without designating the proper placitum. The following was probably designed, (see page 85:) "President Jackson recommends an amendment in relation to the election of President and Vice President." Still we are taught nothing of the proposed amendment; nor do any of the paragraphs under this title elucidate the subject.

Again: under the title "President," we have "annual message in 1831;" which is repeated, *mutatis mutandis*, for eight years, but not a syllable is

given of the contents of these important documents. They should have been analyzed, and their subjects distinctly set forth. We should then have had a birdseye view of the policy of the government for the whole period, and the power to examine any portion of it, without incumbrance from the rest. A properly digested analytical index to the presidential messages from 1789, would furnish an historical outline of the political history of the country since the adoption of the constitution, alike useful to the legislator and the historian.

Having thus rapidly stated some of the defects of the several parts of these indices, I may summarily describe the whole as giving no distinct or intelligible view of the nature and contents of the documents referred to ; no continuous view of the action of the government upon any subject ; whilst it is most desirable, by every official, legislative, judicial, or executive, to have such a view upon every subject. Hence, the labor of investigation becomes uncertain and intolerable, a vast mass of the most interesting and valuable knowledge is hidden, the benefits of the labors of the best minds of the country are diminished, and the lights of experience obscured.

To the congressional journals, I am not aware that any general index has been made.

To remedy the evils I have depicted, and make the records fully useful, a well-digested index to the whole of each series seems indispensable ; by which not only each document and report may be readily found, but its full scope discerned, and every important part distinctly relieved.

To this end, I have proposed to frame three sets of indices : one to the executive documents and reports of committees of both houses ; one to the journals of the House ; and another to the journals of the Senate ;—the first in order to be first executed.

The first index would show on its page an analytical abstract of every document referred to, with the year, the Congress, session, volume, and page to which it belongs. The matter would be classed alphabetically, under as many titles as possible, (the more, the better ;) giving, however, the synopsis of each document under one title only, with reference to that from all the other titles where the matter is noticed. The matter under each title will be arranged numerically, in placita or sections, for the convenience of reference, and the avoidance of repetition.

Such an index would present a general and connected view of the whole action of the government in every department ; a satisfactory analysis of every document and report ; a ready access to each component part or principle, however widely dispersed through the records, with the means of direct access to each document and report, *in extenso*.

Such a work would greatly facilitate inquiry into the proceedings of the government and its agents ; would enable members of Congress, especially such as are not familiar with the records, to master readily every subject of legislation, so far as it had been considered by his predecessors ; to ascertain and correct their errors, or to support his own views by their labors and intelligence. From it the light of experience might be readily concentrated and diffused ; debate be shortened, yet more instructive. The work would save money as well as labor. From ignorance of the contents of the congressional records, calls are frequently made upon the departments for information already furnished, which must be obeyed, often at heavy cost. I have been assured that the expenditure in a session, from this cause, has many times far exceeded the cost of the proposed index.

The work must be one of great labor, requiring exclusive devotion for a long period; much attention, to comprehend correctly the matter, and preserve its connexion; the command of language, and the tact to condense closely; in a word, the skill for correct and lucid abridgment. May I say that my pursuits for years past have tended to qualify me for this labor? The enterprise is one, too, of some risk: no recompense is to be received until a whole series shall be compiled. Death or disease may prevent its completion, and deprive the compiler of the fruits of much labor.

It is a national work, designed chiefly for government officials, and must be created at public expense. If executed, Congress must order such number of copies as will repay labor and cost. What shall be that number? All the departments of government have need of the work; it would be convenient for every member of Congress to have a copy at his chambers; if he carried it home, he would but diffuse the means of useful knowledge; and it may, therefore, be wise to supply the members of several successive Congresses with the work. Less than 1,500 copies would scarcely serve these views. A proposal for that number, however, may find resolute objectors; to conciliate whom, it may be proper to reduce it to that absolutely requisite to cover charges, &c. It is difficult to ascertain this number, by reason of the uncertain extent of the labor. To render the work most useful, it should be compact in form, and printed with small type—say brevier. Each volume might contain 800 pages; but its size would be properly determined by the space necessary for the matter under the classing letters it would contain. Thus, if volume 1 have the indicative letters A, B, C, D, E, F, it should comprehend all the subjects under them. The page, necessarily heavy, (containing nearly twice as much matter as that of Gordon's Digest of the Laws,) being of tabular form, with much figure-work, would cost double-price for composition. Such a volume, therefore, could not be printed and properly bound for less than \$2,000. Any excess of price beyond this, must compensate compilers, copyists, proof-readers, &c.

It is not possible, *a priori*, to state the number of volumes requisite for each series of indices. The executive documents and reports of committees may, perhaps, be comprised in two or three such volumes as above described. We cannot, therefore, fix the price per volume, but may per page; and I propose to receive 1 cent for every printed page—500 copies being taken, and the work bound in strong law sheep.

Annexed, I have given the form of the proposed page; but the exemplar in the archives of the House, filed with the report of the joint Library Committee, February 16th, 1839, (3d session 25th Congress, Rep. No. 49,) contains the best exposition of the plan.

I am, with great respect, &c.,

THOS. F. GORDON.

Hon. EDMUND BURKE.

Form of the proposed indices.

Year.	Congress.	Session.	PRE.	Where found.	House of Reps.			Senate.		
					Volume.	Number.	Page.	Volume.	Number.	Page.
1841	27th	1st	<p>PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE.</p> <p>Here follows an abstract of its contents, arranged in placita, numerically, thus :</p> <p>1. Prosperous state of business noted - - - - -</p> <p>2. Relations with foreign powers—treaty with Spain, France - - - - -</p> <p>3. Condition of finances, (with concise abstract.) - - - - -</p> <p>4. Military operations; war in Florida, (abstract) - - - - -</p> <p>5. Naval operations, (abstract.) - - - - -</p> <p>6. Purchase of land from Indians, (abstract.) - - - - -</p> <p>7. Views relative to tariff, (stating them concisely, &c.) - - - - -</p> <p>Each of these placita will be referred to under its proper head, as thus :</p>	E. D.	1	1	1	1	1	1
					-	-	2	-	-	2
					-	-	4	-	-	5
1841	27th	1st	<p>FLORIDA WAR.</p> <p>State of—see <i>President's message</i>, placitum 4 - - - - -</p> <p>Report of Secretary of War on—see <i>War Department</i>, placitum 10 - - - - -</p>	E. D.	1	1	4			
				E. D.	1	1	20			
1842	27th	2d	<p>INDIANS.</p> <p>Report of committee on civilization of, (stating substance of report, with documents)</p> <p>1. Letter from General A B, (contents.)</p> <p>2. Memorial of Society of Friends, (contents.)</p> <p>3. Report of Secretary of War—see <i>War Department</i>, placitum 20 - - - - -</p>	R. C.	-	-	-	1	10	
				E. D.	-	-	-	1	7	120

It will be observed that the matter of this table is imaginary, having no congressional documents at hand on which to frame the table.

Comparative cost of Gordon's index, and indices heretofore compiled for use of Congress.

BRIDGEWATER P. O., BUCKS COUNTY, PENN.,
December 23, 1844.

DEAR SIR: Having received from Mr. Wallace his minute of the cost of the last index to the documents and reports, I submit to you a comparison between that and my proposition:

The last index, referring to the period between 1831 and 1839,	
comprised 380 pages only, and cost, for compilation	- \$2,500 00
For printing	- 3,216 00
1,250 copies	- \$5,716 00

Apply this ratio to the whole series of existing indices, consisting of 905 pages, we have for cost	- \$13,613 10
Add binding, at 37½ cents per copy	- 468 75
	<u>\$14,081 85</u>

Now, to get at the cost of 500 copies of this work, (the number on which my proposition is based,) we must deduct the cost of printing, paper, &c., for 750 copies, (the excess,) which we will estimate at the cost paid by Congress, under the act of 1819, for printing the journals, &c.—say	- \$841 65
Binding 750 copies, at 37½ cents	- 281 35
	<u>1,123 00</u>

Actual cost of 500 copies of the series	- 12,958 85
Now, 905 pages, 500 copies, at the price I have proposed, would be	- 4,525 00
Difference	- <u>\$8,433 85</u>

Thus, it is apparent that my price for the same number of pages is less than one-third of that which they would cost at the rate paid for the last compilation.

You are aware that the chief cost of every work lies in the compilation, (copyright,) and the composition or type-work; and that, consequently, when these are not spread over many copies, the price must be much higher than when so spread. Thus, it would be more advantageous for a publisher to furnish 750 copies of a volume of 800 pages for \$5,000, or 1,000 copies for \$6,000, than to supply 500 copies for \$4,000. So, if 1,500 copies were taken, the work might be delivered at \$5 per copy; but if 100 copies only were taken, it would not be profitably published at less than \$40 per copy.

Therefore, if Congress would take 1,500 copies of the proposed indices, it would pay, per copy, only six cents more than it has paid for each copy of the last index, containing less than half the quantity which I propose per volume. Here, I offer 1,500 copies of 800 pages, at \$5 = \$7,500; whereas there have been paid \$4 94 per copy for 1,250 copies of 380 pages

only = \$6,184 75; and it would thus obtain 1,500 copies of 420 pages for the sum of \$1,315 25, or at 90 cents the copy.

If this communication arrives in season, it would be well, I think, to print it with that I gave you a few days since.

With much respect, &c.,

THOS. F. GORDON.

HON. EDMUND BURKE.

only as far as I know; and it would have been a great deal better if I had
the time to do it. I am sure that it would be well to have
the communication arrive in season. It would be well to have
it arrive in season that I have you a few days more.

THOS. F. GORDON

THOS. F. GORDON